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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN AG MINISTER SUPPORTS ACTION ON A/H1N1
TRADE RESTRICTIONS

REF: A) Moscow 001556 B) Moscow 001206 C) Moscow 001187
D) Moscow 001150

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Minister of Agriculture Elena Skrynnik met with Ambassador Beyrle on June 22, 2009. In a short and cordial exchange, Skrynnik instructed Federal Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Service (VPSS) leaders present to hold a DVC with USDA technical experts this week in an effort to answer VPSS's remaining questions and towards the eventual lifting of Russia's trade restrictions on US meat related to the A/H1N1 virus outbreak. She also outlined her priorities for Russian agriculture for the near future. Minister Skrynnik was accompanied by both VPSS Head Sergey Dankvert and by his deputy, Russia's Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr. Nikolai Vlasov. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) In her first meeting with Ambassador Beyrle since taking her position in March 2009, Minister Skrynnik agreed that our communications and US relations with Russia in agriculture have improved in recent months. She was very glad to have met Secretary Vilsack during the G8 summit in Italy in April, and she was pleased with the US delegation at the recent World Grain Forum in St. Petersburg (Ref A).

¶3. (U) Minister Skrynnik explained that her goals were to improve the efficiency of agricultural producers, particularly for meat, milk, and wheat. She wants to increase the quality of Russian foods and try to decrease the costs of agricultural products. She noted that Russia is setting up a United Grain Company, which is a consolidation of state-owned assets in the grain sector, but she said that it will take several years before they can implement this objective. She said that Americans need not worry and that the United Grain Company will not be a competitor with the United States in the near term.

¶4. (U) The Ambassador raised the issue of meat trade problems that are always taking center stage. During this second half of the meeting which dealt with meat trade problems, Sergey Dankvert spoke up often and also regularly advised the Minister. Mr. Dankvert noted that despite all of the problems, Russia bought more meat from the USA in 2008 than in the past. The Ambassador countered by saying that when our Presidents met in April, they agreed that the level of trade between our two countries is really quite

low considering the size of our two economies and that agricultural products including meat could help to fill the gap. Mr. Dankvert initiated and the Minister repeated a request that USDA appoint one responsible veterinarian who could be contacted by CVO Vlasov on a regular basis.

¶15. (U) The Ambassador then referred to the letter from USDA veterinarians concerning A/H1N1 of June 16, 2009 which he presented to the Deputy Minister on June 17, 2009. He stated there is no basis for Russia's restrictions on US meat and urged the Minister to acknowledge the scientific fact that the virus cannot be transmitted through meat and to lift the restrictions. Minister Skrynnik replied by proposing a digital video conference (DVC) between appropriate technical specialists this week in order to raise questions and get answers from the American scientists. She stated that if sufficient information is forthcoming, we can positively resolve this matter prior to the Presidential summit in Moscow (July 6-7). We agreed to schedule this DVC as soon as possible and to try to resolve this issue promptly.

¶16. (U) Mr. Dankvert then stated that as a result of the DVC they could likely resume trade in poultry from the restricted two states (IL and WI), but there may still be a few pending issues on pork for 2 - 3 states. Everyone agreed that it is necessary to make the right decisions based on objective, scientific information, and that Russian consumers should be properly protected and informed.

¶17. (U) The Ambassador then raised the matter of the reinstatement of US meat plants which Russia has removed

from the eligible lists of export facilities. He proposed re-listing these facilities and in the future implementing a 90-day grace period rather than automatic de-listing when VPSS finds a violation. This would give US companies and USDA a chance to analyze the information and report back the results before any restrictions are implemented. Mr. Dankvert replied he had wanted to discuss this in Paris in May 2009 but unfortunately was unable to meet with some US counterparts, who were attending another meeting. He said if he did this for the USA then other countries would want the same treatment and that this might be a problem. But he said we can continue our discussion on this matter.

¶18. (U) Comment: Despite the fact that Minister Skrynnik did not show up for the meeting originally scheduled for June 17, she approached the session with a positive attitude. It was she who brought up the concept of resolving the A/H1N1 trade restrictions in the coming two weeks before the Obama-Medvedev summit. The DVC is now scheduled for June 29. We have informed USDA technical experts of VPSS's questions and encouraged them to come prepared to answer the Russian's questions, in order to make the most of this opportunity. It will take not only technical but also political progress to resolve the A/H1N1 trade restrictions, but Minister Skrynnik has at least expressed her political support for a resolution and directed her technical experts to make time to promptly work on this matter.

BEYRL